

# MAINE PUBLIC HEALTH ALERT NETWORK SYSTEM

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TO: All Maine Health Alert Network Recipients

FROM: Dora Anne Mills, M.D., M.P.H., Public Health Director

SUBJECT: **World Health Organization Declares Pandemic Phase 6 for H1N1**

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Maine Center for Disease Control and Prevention (Maine CDC)  
(Formerly Bureau of Health)

**World Health Organization (WHO) Declaration of Pandemic Phase 6 for Novel H1N1 Influenza**  
**Maine CDC/DHHS June 11, 2009**

**What do the WHO phases mean?**

The WHO phases are based on the geographical spread of a novel influenza virus. As “pandemic” means worldwide epidemic, a WHO Phase 6 means that the virus is spreading across the globe. What the WHO phases do not do is predict the severity of the virus.

Using a hurricane analogy, the WHO phase system simply tells us that a hurricane is imminent, but it does not tell us how big or how strong the storm might be. It is the strength of a hurricane that dictates which pre-landfall actions are needed, such as just boarding up windows versus a full evacuation. While weather forecasters can fly an airplane into the eye of a hurricane to measure a storm’s strength and predict its ultimate severity, there is no such forecasting tool for flu viruses.

**Does WHO’s change to Phase 6 mean the virus is more severe?**

No. It is important to understand that this change is based on the geographic spread of the virus to other parts of the world and does not necessarily reflect any change in the severity of the virus or associated illness.

**So why did WHO move to Phase 6 if the virus severity is unchanged?**

The move to Phase 6 is really an alert that the spread of the H1N1 virus is now expected to traverse the globe and those nations where the virus has yet to arrive should expect to eventually see cases and be prepared to respond.

**What does the phase change mean for Maine? What will the Maine do differently?**

Here in the United States, the virus has been spreading steadily from person-to-person since April, and we have seen H1N1 spread in Maine since late April, so today’s announcement by WHO does not really change what we are already doing here at home to respond.

In response to an influenza pandemic, governments, communities, workplaces and individuals will base the intensity of their efforts to reduce spread of the virus on the severity of the disease, as reflected by the number of deaths and hospitalizations from the virus.

The United States and Maine have been responding to the H1N1 flu in a way that balances the health of our residents while minimizing disruption to society. We will continue to provide guidance using the most current scientific data available about the H1N1 influenza.

Regardless of what WHO calls or labels this, we are taking necessary and aggressive measures to protect the health of our residents out of an abundance of caution.

## **What actions has Maine taken already?**

Since the first reports of the appearance of novel H1N1 flu in the U.S., Maine CDC/DHHS, other state agencies, health care, emergency management, public health, and many other sectors have been actively and aggressively implementing pandemic response plans. Maine CDC/DHHS has been working with many partners to track the virus' spread in Maine, implemented mitigation strategies to slow the transmission down until a vaccine is available, assured those who are ill are appropriately treated and isolated, provided information to the public and our many partners, stockpiled antiviral medications, and activated plans in case the virus spreads and worsens in severity.

## **Is the outbreak over in the U.S.?**

The only thing certain about flu viruses is uncertainty. As we have been saying for some time, we do expect that we will see more cases, more hospitalizations and more deaths from this virus. However, to date most people who have become ill with novel H1N1 in Maine and in the United States have not become seriously ill and have recovered without hospitalization.

We will continue to watch this virus carefully, especially in the Southern Hemisphere. Every day we learn more about this virus and its impact on human health. As we learn new information, we will adjust our responses and planning, and inform the public and continue to do all we can to make this outbreak less severe.

## **Is there anything individuals can do?**

There are everyday common sense things that people must do to protect their health and lessen the spread of the novel H1N1 virus as well as seasonal flu viruses. Wash your hands and cover your mouth when you cough or sneeze with a tissue or your elbow. If you are sick, stay home, recover, and keep others well. Avoid going to work or school and delay travel plans. Limit your contact with others. And stay informed—be sure to visit [www.mainepublichealth.gov](http://www.mainepublichealth.gov) and [www.cdc.gov](http://www.cdc.gov) to get the latest information as it becomes available. You can also call 211.

## **What does Phase 6 mean for vaccine development and production?**

First, it is important to recognize that developing a vaccine for use, in case it is needed, is different from recommending individuals be immunized. There is a great deal still unknown, including the severity of illness caused by the virus, how the virus will evolve, how the outbreak plays out in the coming weeks to months, and what populations may be most (or least) at risk.

The process of vaccine preparation is already underway and decisions regarding production will be informed by what we learn about the need for such a vaccine and what we learn about the vaccine itself as it is developed and is used in clinical studies. The goal is to have vaccine(s) ready, if needed, but this is a multi-step process and the decisions to have a vaccine ready, if needed, including, potentially, to produce such vaccines on a large-scale level, is distinct from any decision to recommend its use.

Maine CDC/DHHS is maintaining close contact with U.S. CDC and working with others to implement plans for large scale vaccination if necessary.